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Review/Reseña

Adrian Taylor Kane. *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative: Literary Invention and Cultural Change (1926-1936)*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2014.

The Politics and Poetics of the Central American Avant-Garde

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While the generally-regarded heyday of avant-garde production in Latin America occurred in the 1920s and 30s, the production of avant-garde texts continued well beyond that period, particularly in the case of Central America. In fact, the major proponents of a Central American *vanguardista* movement (loosely defined), including Max Jiménez, Flavio Herrera, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Luis Cardoza y Aragón, continued their production of avant-garde-influenced literature into the 1940s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, respectively. The latter two writers have seen a fairly consistent critical treatment of their works though only in the case of Asturias has this output been marketable outside of Latin America through English-language studies and translations. With that exception, however,

critical treatments of the Central American avant-garde have simply not kept pace with the (perhaps surprisingly) vast body of literature that constitute the movement, particularly in English-language studies.

Adrian Kane's 2014 book *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative* expands the small body of critical work dedicated to the *vanguardia* of the isthmus, providing both the first English-language treatment of the movement, and giving a reading of several major works and writers that were central to the movement in the 1920s and 30s, grounded consistently in a critical framework that situates the texts aesthetically and politically. While not polemical in nature, Kane's book does work to dispel two ideas that have served as points of frustration for scholars of the Central American avant-garde: first, that the Latin American *vanguardia* was primarily a movement associated with poetry (see Méndez, p. 46); and second, that the works of the Central American avant-garde were secondary to those works produced in Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America, to the point that "Central American avant-garde fiction is a field that has been marginalized by scholars within both Latin American literary criticism and avant-garde studies" (Kane 1).

Kane grounds his study critically through the historical rejection of Positivism, both when it occurred explicitly (as in the case of Asturias in the late 1920s) and when it was implied more organically through the aesthetic framework utilized by the writer in question (such as with Max Jiménez's more explicit rejection of the Positivist-influenced political system of 1930s Costa Rica). Coupled with this framework is the diminishment of genre, which Kane wisely makes clear in his reading of the works of Cardoza, a writer who was adamant about the unimportance of poetry or narrative as distinct literary categories, and extends it to the other authors studied (as in the case of the interplay of text and image in Jiménez's output). In this respect, Kane's book undoes the insistence by critics to treat genre as central, even with avant-garde writers who consciously subverted such labels.¹ This framework allows Kane space to demonstrate the rejection by these authors of Positivist-influenced projects that attempted to encourage

¹ See for example Albizúrez Palma and Barrios y Barrios's treatment of Cardoza's works, such as *Maelstrom*, as prose poems (209-210).

“progress” throughout the early 20th century, but had the effect of marginalizing the poorer and indigenous populations within the isthmus, and to motivate social change through playful and ludic literary works.

Kane’s general argument that the avant-garde movement rejected the tenets of Comtean Positivism is well-grounded in the case of Central America, where the influence of Comte and the reach of Vasconcelos were strongly felt within the military dictatorships and political oligarchies that plagued the region in the first half of the 20th century. *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative* is very successful in demonstrating the influence of Positivist thought within these regimes, and in the avant-garde artists’ need to reject this philosophy as part of a rejection of authoritarianism in the isthmus. Kane rightly points out the education of both Cardoza and Asturias in the Instituto Nacional Central para Varones, where the latter was so inured in the teachings of Positivism that his 1923 law thesis plainly upholds the ideals of a “raza cósmica” that would improve the blood of the indigenous population to the point that that class might contribute to the advancement of progress in the nation. (That said, Kane takes the position supported by René Prieto that Asturias rejected both Positivism and its social and racial implications around 1927 or 1928, and that his later works present positive treatments of the indigenous population. While there is little question that Asturias did shift away from Positivism at this time, Asturias’s racism can be demonstrated in biographical terms until his death, and the treatment of indigenous myth and characters has been a point of continual and often polemical debate.²)

The book’s insistence upon the rejection of Positivism, however, belies a more complicated picture of the production of avant-garde works in Central America, indicating that the turn away from that system of thought meant a turn away from mimesis in general, or from the notion that Surrealist or Dada art rejected the idea of presenting the world in realist terms. Inevitably, when regarding the separation between avant-garde and more “realist”-type works, the words of George Lukács are instructive: “The dividing line is often blurred, if only because all writing must contain a certain degree of realism. Indeed, there is a fundamental truth at stake

² See Esquit for one recent and convincing treatment of Asturias and race.

here: realism is not one style among others, it is the basis of all literature; all styles (even those most seemingly opposed to realism) originate in it or are significantly related to it” (48). For Breton and the Surrealists, for example, the significance of dreams and dream-logic was not a rejection of the real, but rather a separate comprehension of that reality, utilizing a logic that was merely difficult to comprehend in a waking state (Breton 14). In this light, the rejection of Positivism by the avant-garde writers of the 1920s and 30s in Central America was a turning away from political policies and platforms that diminished the place of the less-powerful elements of their nations, but not a wholesale rejection of the notion of presenting the world through a guise of “realism.”

Central American Avant-Garde Narrative's insistence on the rejection of Positivism as an end rather than only part of the aim of the *vanguardistas* comes from approaches taken to avant-garde fiction in the past, which Kane does attempt to break through with certain writers, though historically this type of approach is both a problem of definition and a limitation in the understanding of the trajectory of artistic movements in Europe and Latin America. The tendency of viewing the *vanguardia* in Latin America as a predominately Surrealist- or Dada-influenced movement,³ rather than viewing those movements as a natural progression from the earlier Cubists or Futurists, or the Simultaneists, leaves the avant-garde as a body of texts divorced from the influences of technological progress that conditioned all of these movements in Europe and Latin America. And while the emergence of avant-garde literature in Central America would seem far removed from the literary production that preceded it (and as Kane references in his introduction (p. 27-28), the works of Rafael Arévalo Martínez in Guatemala are those that come closest to a avant-garde sensibility without ever actually reaching it), the authors of these works were fully conscious of the aesthetic development of European art in the 1920s, each of them having lived in Europe for a time and been acquainted with leading figures of the European avant-garde. Furthermore, the influence of Cubism and Futurism is apparent in several of the works

³ See Méndez, p. 37, as an example of viewing the *vanguardia* through the lens of Surrealism, disconnected from Cubism or Futurism.

included in the book, such as Rogelio Sinán's "El sueño de Serafín del Cármen" or Luis Cardoza y Aragón's *Maelstrom: films telescopiados*, as well as being located at times in Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (as in the novel's opening when *El Pelele* runs through the labyrinthine, Cubist-influenced streets).

Kane is certainly conscious of this trajectory, placing Flavio Herrera's *El tigre* in the contexts of Surrealism and Cubism, dedicating considerable attention to the novel's Cubist-influenced narrative structure and its interplay with fragmentation within the characters' conscious (and unconscious) visions of the world. This is particularly beneficial in analyzing a work like *El tigre* that is focused so concertedly through spatial conceptions of reality. In this regard, the focus on Surrealism alone in the works of Cardoza or Sinán would seem to diminish the function of space within their texts. The dream-like imagery of the dancing of Isadora Duncan in "El sueño de Serafín del Cármen" or the adventures of Keemby in *Maelstrom* are coupled with spatial leaps that owe little to Breton's Surrealist movement, which had turned toward the incongruence of objects within a space rather than the manipulation of that space itself, but which are fully indebted to the Cubists.⁴ For as much as Cardoza in particular rejected the concern for specific genres in determining the literary nature of his works, in pointless arguments over whether to classify his writings as poetry, narrative, or prose-poems (as Kane references in a footnote on p. 49), the tendency to pigeon-hole his writings as foundationally Surrealist (as in Liano, p. 107, for example) carries with it the diminishment of the vast repertory of aesthetic mediums upon which his works drew, as well as the inherently spatially-motivated perspectives he presented. He, along with Sinán and to a lesser degree Asturias, serves as a prime example of the manner in which Central American avant-garde fiction maintained the

⁴ See Henderson, in particular p. 176-217, for a description of the Cubist use of space, specifically in the period of Epic Cubism, where the physical earth becomes folded upon itself. Breton's Surrealist movement had turned to the focus of time as the fourth dimension, following Einstein's Relativity Theory, rather than the manipulation or shifting of space, which had come about through Roentgen's discovery of the X-ray. As a consequence, and in broad terms, the Cubists were concerned with the fourth dimension as it applied to the artist's perception of the object in space.

concern for space in its utilization of Surrealist modes, thus breaking in large measure from the European Surrealist movement, which had diminished the concerns of the Cubists and Futurists.

The function of Cubism and Futurism in the evaluation of the Central American avant-garde helps to maintain that its literary output was not merely a playful response to the stodginess of earlier Central American writers (a point that Kane likewise rejects), using dream-logic to work outside the borders of Positivism, but part of a response to a region of quasi-dictatorships (as in Costa Rica prior to the 1948 Civil War) or *de facto* military dictatorships (as in Guatemala before the 1944 Guatemalan Revolution), where the fragmentation of the social structure found an outlet within the protests lodged by these writers. In this respect, Kane is entirely correct to emphasize the influence of European art and literature upon all five of the primary authors studied in this book. Where the argument at times feels strained is in the tendency to see the development of avant-garde production as a response to social stratification and violence, rather than as the mode through which these writers were already working, and which they then turned against the social breakdown they witnessed.

In this respect, the book does well to indicate the social ills of Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panama during the formative years of these authors as well as at the time they were active, yet to varying effect. The chapters on Herrera and Jiménez are fully enlightening approaches to both author's work, and the texts feel well-selected. The choice of *Maelstrom* in the chapter on Cardoza enables a clear view of the heteronymous forms contained within the text, yet the novel's lack of focus on a Central American *milieu* leads to a reading of the text that struggles to establish a strong connection to Guatemalan society and response to the dictatorship of Estrada Cabrera. Cardoza's later *Pequeña sinfonía del Nuevo Mundo*, which Kane concedes had been previously studied in Méndez's book from 2006, would deliver a clearer response to the circumstance of 1920s and 30s Guatemala while still providing an opening for the heteronymous influences upon his writings, including the emphasis on ludics. The reading of Sinán's stories is similarly enlightening in terms of the aesthetic

approaches taken, though it would be enhanced through the combination of Surrealist and Cubist techniques in both texts, rather than focusing on Cubism in “A la orilla” and Surrealism in “El sueño de Serafín del Cármen,” and again the political link appears tenuous. The reading Kane provides on Asturias’s literary output from the 1920s and 30s provides a very welcome addition to the relatively large body of criticism on the Guatemalan Nobel laureate. Foremost among its contributions is a clear approach to two of the author’s seminal early works, *Leyendas de Guatemala* and *El Señor Presidente*, coupled with a reading of the early and often-neglected story “La barba provisional.” Here again Kane provides a solid link between the avant-garde output of Asturias and the military dictatorships of Estrada Cabrera and Ubico. This reading is of course common to previous approaches to *El Señor Presidente*, yet the emphasis on Surrealism in all three works, and the situating of *Leyendas de Guatemala* and “La barba provisional” within the political context of 1920s Guatemala, is refreshing and valuable for scholars and students engaging with these works.

It is entirely revitalizing to see a work devoted to the Central American avant-garde that both grounds its focus critically and keeps its focus on both the aesthetics and politics that grounded the literary production of the *vanguardia* in the early 20th century. Adrian Kane’s *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative* is thus a very welcomed addition to the corpus of writings on the avant-garde, valuable to students and scholars of Central American literature, and those studying the avant-garde from any region. His introduction, which situates the avant-garde through the writings of literary figures Vicente Huidobro, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Benjamín Jarnés, and José Ortega y Gasset, and which draws on the critical theories of Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger is testament to this fact. One hopes that this text will serve as a doorway to further explorations of the avant-garde in Central America, which could only benefit from approaches and considerations as varied as the texts that its writers produced.

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